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Universal Story in Oriental Reality Contemporary Iranian Novel *Women without Men* by Šahrnuš Pārsipur

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Abstract

The article is based on the author's experience of the translation of the contemporary Iranian novel *Women without Men* by Šahrnuš Pārsipur. The translation has been made from Persian to Polish language. The article refers to the problem of untranslatability of denotations connected with different socio-cultural context experienced by Oriental and European readers. The book itself is presented as well as its universal meaning that may be interested for the readers from Western countries. In the continuation of the article the author pays attention to a few examples of her own solutions made while making the text comprehensible for the Polish readers without loosing the exotics of Oriental culture.

Translating literature from Oriental languages we face the problems of untranslatability of denotations connected with different socio-cultural context experienced by Oriental and European readers. I had to deal with it translating from Persian to Polish the chapters of the contemporary Iranian novel *Women without Men* (original Persian title: *Zanān bedun-e mardān*) written by Šahrnuš Pārsipur. Some words and descriptions used by Pārsipur are related to the reality usually unfamiliar to Polish readers.

Referring to these problems I would like to present the book itself and to show its universal meaning that may be interesting for the readers from Western countries. I will also pay attention to a few examples of solutions made when I was trying to make the text comprehensible without loosing the exotics of Oriental culture.

The Novel by Šahrnuš Pārsipur

Šahrnuš Pārsipur is a contemporary Iranian writer, born in 1946 in Tehran. She made her debut in the late 1960's publishing short stories and in 1969 published her first novel *Tupak-e qermez* (The Little Red Ball), a story for young people. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 she was imprisoned for more than four years. In the late 1980's she became very popular among Iranian readers thanks to publishing the novel *Tubā va ma'nā-ye šab* (*Tubā and the Meaning of Night*). This bestseller has been translated into Western languages, but remains banned in Iran like many of her books. Since 1994 Pārsipur has been living in exile[1].

The book of my interest, *Women without Men*, is one of the most popular works of Pārsipur, also banned in Iran. The author begun to write it in 1970's during her stay in Paris. Finally the novel was published in Tehran in 1990 by Našr-e Noqre and sold out in less than two weeks (Pārsipur 1368 [1989/1990]). Soon it was withdrawn from the book market by the Iranian government and its second printing was never distributed. The subject matter of this book openly referring to the issue of virginity and raising taboo topics deeply rooted in Iranian culture was the main reason for Pārsipur's second arrest. Later the novel was reprinted in Persian twice in the United States and once in Europe and also translated into different languages as English, Spanish, Swedish, Malayalam, Italian. Recently it has been published in Poland translated by an unanimous translator (Parsipur 2010).

The historical background of the story described in *Women without Men* is the overthrow of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. This event took place in August 1953 and a few chapters of the book are directly interwoven with political situation on the streets of the capital city those days. Pārsipur through fifteen chapters tells the story of five Iranian women of different age and social origin living in different districts of Tehran. Mahdoxt, who works as a teacher, is a single woman disappointed by an Iranian society upholding traditional beliefs. Mrs. Farroxleqā Sadroddivān Golčehre, a lady from the upper middle class, is bored by the reality surrounding her, living in the world of fantasies, unhappy in her marriage. Zarrin Kolāh is a young prostitute form the Šahr-e Nou district and friends Munes and Fā'eze are two old virgin maidens. All of the women have experienced critical moments that lead

[1] Further information about Pārsipur's biography and publications are available at her official website http://www.shahrnushparsipur.com/.

them to leave their former lives and to face the new reality. Trend of events results in their meeting in the garden in Karaj, which has been bought by Mrs. Farroxleqā. The garden is a sort of utopia with minimal presence of men. Women can live there independently and freely, far from the male-dominated Iranian society: 'Karaj, its gardens, and its rivers, promise hope, freedom, and mobility' (Talattof 2000: 147).

Universalism of the Story

As I mentioned before, the background of the story are historical events that took place in Iran in summer 1953. However, the situation described in the novel can be read as a metaphor of the contemporary situation concerning women in Iran. As Kamran Talattof states, 'the book clearly speaks to women's issues during the years after 1979 revolution. In a sense, these historical periods are metaphorically connected' (Talattof 2004: 45). It is why I decided to deal with the book that is very up-to-date.

The book by Pārsipur deals with the problems of women in patriarchal Iranian society: 'The novel shows how the normative sexual morality surrounding female virginity shapes the feelings, aspirations, and internal conflicts of women. It disputes those norms that have justified violence against women and often have led to sympathy for the violator. Parsipur demystifies sexuality, virginity, and rape by speaking frankly about them' (Talattof 2000: 147). Constructing five women characters having so different social background, Pārsipur presents the diverse aspects of being a woman in Iran. The author articulates 'what it means to be an Iranian woman, or to be precise, the Iranian womanhood as represented by Tehrani women' (Massombagi 2001). The women's issues shown in the context of 1950's are actual for contemporary Iranians.

The Pārsipur's novel is full of magical and mythological elements. Munes turns into tree of life, Zarrin Kolāh gives birth to a lily flower, Munes is killed by her brother but rises from the dead. As Talattof remarks, contemporary Iranian women writers as Pārsipur or Ravānipur 'found magical realism to be an accommodating genre that could convey realities that otherwise evaded expression within any satisfactionary realm of reality' (Talattof 2000: 156). The surrealism of images presented in the book lets the author present taboo topics in Iranian literary discourse. Moreover, the book is not only an interesting story about an exotic Iranian reality. The mythological references and magic realism of the novel shift the interpretation of the story to more universal level. It may be understood as a symbolic story of friendship, love, relations with nature and with others, searching for one's identity. It is what I think makes the Pārsipur's novel very interesting and attractive for foreign readers, not only those who are interested in Iranian culture.

Translation of Oriental Reality

In spite of mentioned universality, the story is deeply rooted in the reality that is unknown by Western readers in greater part. In the process of translating books from Oriental languages the most difficult challenge for a translator is to present the different social and cultural context of the story. As Edward Sapir states, 'No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached' (Sapir 1949: 69).

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the difficulty we face translating such stories may be called an '*untranslatability of denotations*'. *We have to deal with terms and the combinations of words that have been created for naming and marking the elements of foreign reality. This is the reality experienced by the reader of original story, but usually unknown and new for the reader of the translation (Balcerzan* 1998: 65*). In such case, as Anna Krasnowolska remarks in her article dealing with the translation problems concerning another* Pārsipur's *novel, 'Tubā and the Meaning of Night', 'a translator has to undertake a double task: not only has he to transpose the text from one language and literary system to another but, moreover, to present the mother-culture of the text to its reader in the way which would allow him to reduce the gap between the two cultures and to enable a reader to move, more or less freely, within the dense reality of the novel' (Krasnowolska 2006: 49).*

Luckily for Western translator in the text of 'Women without Men' by Šahrnuš Pārsipur there are relatively not so many terms describing elements of everyday life characteristic for Persian culture as we may expected. For some of them we may find close Polish words, which are not equivalents, but may be helpful for Polish reader, as for Persian *hayāt* (translated into Polish as *podwórko* 'yard'), *houz* (*sadzawka* 'pool') or *taxt* (ława 'bench'). In these cases exact defining of the above-mentioned Persian objects is not crucial for understanding the plot. I think that in spite of the exotic context it is still a popular novel and there is no point in overloading it by annotations describing the terms of secondary importance for understanding the meaning.

The translator always has to compromise between making text comprehensible for foreign readers and not loosing exotism of the translated text. In the fragment where two women compete in making a sumptuous dinner, we can find names of Persian food prepared by one of them in contrast to *farangi* food, it means European food prepared but the second woman. First woman prepares *xoreš-e bādemğān*, *tah*-čin-*e barre*, ğuğe-kabāb and *m*āst-*o-esfenāğ*. I think that elements of Persian cuisine as *xoreš*, *tah-čin* or *kabāb* in this context should be left in Persian with annotation. However, in English translation of the book made by Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet (Parsipur 1998) the terms has been translated into English as 'eggplant', 'lamb and rice', 'grilled chicken' and 'yoghurt and spinach'. I think that using this strategy

wiped away the intentional contrast of Persian and European meals. We can compare it by reading the Persian original sentences followed both by my Polish translation and English translation by Talattof and Sharlet:

Xoreš-e bādemğān dorost kardam. Tah-čin-e barre dorost kardam. Ğuğe-kabāb dorost kardam. Če ğuğe-kabābi (Pārsipur 1368 [1989/1990]: 28).
Zrobiłam *choresz* z bakłażana i *tahczin* z jagnięciny. *Kebab* z kurczaka. I to jaki!
'I made eggplant. I made lamb and rice. And grilled chicken – such grilled chicken!' (Parsipur 1998: 21).

The word *kabāb* has been already adopted by Polish language as *kebab*, although the translator needs to have in mind that it refers rather to the *Turkish kabāb*, not to the griled one, as is meant in the text. So the terms referring to meals that are commonly unknown in Poland are left in their Persian version and they definitely need an explanation. The transcription I use is the simplified one and it results in words readable for Polish readers[2]. I state that in such cases as the one mentioned above a translator should leave the words untranslated. It is a psychological measure that emphasizes the strangeness of some elements belonging to different civilization or customs that do not exist in the world of foreign reader what results in the lack of proper terms (Balcerzan 1998: 65-66).

Such difficult situations are common not only for translations from Oriental to Western languages but for every translation from one language to another. We may say tat translation means making decisions one by one whether we shall stress the distinctiveness or the sameness of elements found in the text. As a very helpful I would like to recall the though a translator should have in mind and I try to follow while dealing with translation problems. It is that the reader of translated text should repeat and share the same feelings and reactions as the reader of original story does (Balcerzan 1998: 68). Or, at least, comparable feelings. A very good example refers to Persian conversations full of *ta'ārofs*. *Ta'ārofs* are Iranian compliments and in everyday Persian language they are used much more frequently that we are used to hear in Polish language. For a Polish reader such conversations translated literally would be unnatural and funny. They would not be taken seriously, so the feelings and reactions of the readers of these two language would completely differ from each other. In such cases a translator needs to use his or her intuition to transpose the fragment properly

[2] I would like to mention that the Polish translator of the Pārsipur's book published in 2010 by Claroscuro misses this point sometimes. Used transcription of Persian names is not very friendly for Polish reader, for example *Faezeh* is used instead of a simple and readable in Polish *Fajeze* or *Hedayat* instead of *Hedajat*. The last one is used in the translator's afterword and surprises the most, because *Hedajat* in this simplified form has been adopted by Polish readers many years ago through the translation of his 'Blind Owl' from Persian into Polish.

and clearly for new readers. Sometimes the fragments of conversation full of *ta'ārofs* should be deprived of excessive politeness that in Polish language sounds artificially. The conversation may also be shorten and the number of the compliments used in Persian version reduced to a number acceptable in similar Polish conversations.

Furthermore, the foreign reader should be aware of the political context of the story or should at least have a chance to look for information about the topic whenever he or she likes to. That is the point that the mentioned above English translation of Women without Men lacks sometimes. For example the date *ruz-e 25 mordād sāl-e 1332* was not replaced by its equivalent from Gregorian calendar and instead of the 16th of August, the twenty-fifth of August, 1953, has been used. For the reader who knows or wants to check the run of events in Iran in August 1953, this little difference removes the exact historical context.

The most important problem arises when the lack of foreign reader's knowledge of the Oriental reality may directly lead to incomprehension of the events described in the story. In *Women without men* by Pārsipur it may happen for example in the fragment where *siqe*, a temporary marriage, is mentioned. This Shi'i institution has no equivalent in Western culture and a translator nor can replace it with the equivalent neither may leave the reader without an annotation. When one of the women in the novel becomes a temporary wife of her friend's brother the characteristic features of such relation and the reason for her decisions are clear for Persian reader but not obvious for the readers of translation.

Another similar example is reference to the Šahr-e Nou district (in English 'the New City') in Tehran that appears in the chapter describing the life of Zarrin Kolāh, a young prostitute living in this place. The context of the Šahr-e Nou district is important to understand this woman's situation. It should be explained that before the Islamic revolution it was a part of the capital city set aside for houses of prostitution and also what a specific situation surrounding the life of prostitutes in the country of such culture as Iran is. Also the fragment describing *hammām*, the public bath, is deeply rooted in the context of the Middle Eastern culture and the situation Pārsipur refers to has no equivalent in Polish reality.

In such cases the translator has to decide whether to complete the topic with annotations or to leave it as it is. Of course every book translated from any Oriental language may happen upon so called lazy reader who does not look for annotations and further explanations. Anyway I think that translating a book we have to give a chance to the reader who wants to deepen his or her knowledge, not only to read an interesting novel.

As I have presented above an Oriental novel may be interesting for foreign readers not only because it describes an exotic culture. It may be also interesting because of its values and universalism appealing to readers regardless of their interest or knowledge of the Orient. The translator has to decide how far he or she can move

away from the original text and how many exotic Oriental elements should be translocated, it means left literally, and – whenever needed - followed by annotations. In the case of the described Šahrnuš Pārsipur's novel 'Women without Men' the proper translator's decisions may result in a book that accustoms foreigners with Iranian culture and its difficult women issues and at the same time is a universal lecture for readers of every culture origin. I think it makes the challenge worth to accept.

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